

Global short stories competition

December 2010 Winner

Unmusical Bumps

Andrew Campbell-Kearsey

The noise of the steam from the iron makes it difficult to follow the play on the radio. I usually enjoy the menial task of pressing a scrunched up shirt from the bottom of the laundry pile and transforming it into an article of clothing that a gentlemen's outfitters would be proud to display in their window. But today I am not creating my finest work; it must be nerves. Fortunately, the jacket will cover most of the creases. I can't recall the last time I polished shoes but I will make the effort today. I remember the rigmarole as a child: my father had a complete array of brushes and cloths. A strict order of application was always necessary. Now it's easier. You sponge the polish on and wait for it to dry. He would call it immoral - as all short cuts were in his eyes.

I had difficulty sleeping last night; too many things to think about. I haven't exactly worked out a speech, but do I know the gist of what I want to say when I get there this evening.

I need something to occupy my mind this afternoon before I set off. I relax into Doris Day extolling the virtues of the Deadwood Stage in Surround-sound. That was the term given to me by the man in the shop. He explained the technological developments in sound transmission and aural enjoyment. My preoccupation was that there would be no unsightly wires and that the volume could be turned up to practically deafening levels. This has been achieved.

I used to sing along with my mother as she ironed. I would make my own stagecoach out of the laundry basket. That, of course, was when music had been technically allowed in our home. Even at the age of three or four I knew that her voice was not terribly strong and that she could not hit the high notes. That didn't matter. It was an activity that we did together, without my father knowing. The record player was turned off just before he was expected home. Fortunately, he was a man of regular habits and we were never caught out. I can't recall exactly when the strict 'No Music' rule came into our home. I do remember, at my sixth birthday party, my mother clapping so that we could play a kind of unmusical bumps. When she stopped applauding we had to sit down abruptly on the floor.

It's no good. I am unable to concentrate on the movie. I'll start the drive. It's not a terribly long journey. I reckon it will take just over an hour, but it's not a route I've driven for over twenty-five years. I have successfully avoided any reason to visit that particular suburb. Perhaps, subconsciously, I always knew that I would set out far too early. This would inevitably lead to spending time in the area where I grew up.

I park the car by the familiar parade of shops. How on earth do some of these shops keep going? Who buys wool and knitting patterns these days? The post office has gone. There is some sort of deli with a startling range of olives. The same bench is there, dedicated to Ethel Snodgrass's dog. I can't work out why I ever thought that so hysterically funny. The paving stones, which had wheel-width sized grooves in them, where I would park my Chopper, were still there but filled in with rubbish and moss. I don't want to be spotted by anyone. There will be enough of that later. I put my collar up and put on a woolly hat I have in my pocket. Combined with my shifty loitering I now resemble somebody who should be claiming royalties from screenings of Crimewatch.

I pass my old primary school. The local authority has invested in an impressive sign. There is now an Asian headteacher and a female caretaker. Unfortunately, the funding has not extended to replacing the 'temporary' classroom huts that I can see through the fence. I remember them well. Would a forensic team be able to track down any of my DNA? Was there any trace of me? I was far too well behaved to leave any graffiti, scared of the disproportionate punishment from home rather than a strong inner moral code. Naturally, it all seems smaller than in my memory. I wonder if the same would be true for my parents. I know that they are both alive from the announcement. Maybe they've shrunk. It seems to happen with age. Perhaps my mother has been ravaged by osteoporosis. Hopefully my father will have been cut down to size.

I turn the corner. The church is at the end of the road. I can see people heading into the adjacent hall. As I draw nearer I can see that they are all carrying tins and Tupperware containers. I thought about

bringing a present or at least a card. I feel guilty turning up out of the blue empty handed. But what am I celebrating? I hold back. The large banner outside the church hall announces the farewell supper to my father and to wish him well in his forthcoming retirement. My mother does not even merit a mention, although she has tirelessly supported his calling. The start time is not for another quarter of an hour, yet my father has managed to impress upon, not just his family, but his entire congregation the righteousness of punctuality. I will slip in once the speeches have begun.

I avoid eye contact with any of the congregation. I find a seat in the back row. These blue stackable plastic chairs are a welcome improvement, yet thirty years too late for my back. It was one of my unenviable tasks: 'in the service of the Lord' to erect and then collapse wooden chairs for prayer meetings and Bible studies. I would always be chastised for never putting enough of them out. My teenage excuse was that empty chairs looked depressing. My father always attributed it to my workshy attitude to life.

I don't recognise the man from the eulogies. Apparently, we are here to honour a saint, not the petty and vindictive man who is my father. In an orderly fashion, speaker after speaker rises to pay tribute to his plethora of admirable qualities. I'm not a big fan of science fiction but maybe here is an example of parallel universes. I spent my formative nineteen years growing up in the same house, yet do not recognise this paragon. All I can see of him is the back of his head, which nods from time to time. He remains facing forward, no doubt lapping up the unctuous praise from his disciples. Occasionally I can pick out my mother's profile as she turns to gaze adoringly at her husband.

Eventually, we reach the climax of the proceedings. My father is invited to speak to his gathered flock. There is a heightened sense of collective anticipation as he takes the few steps to the front of the hall. He is accustomed to looking down on his followers from a raised lectern in the church next door. The only sounds as he clears his throat are from the kitchen: the tea urn bubbling, the unpeeling of clingfilm and the prising open of Tupperware lids. He leads everybody in prayer. As he raises his head after his final Amen, his voice seems momentarily bereft of its usual authority and certainty. Is this due to the emotion of the occasion or has he caught a glimpse of me? His ministry is coming to an end. I delight in the knowledge that he will no longer impact upon the lives of so many. The thought that his opinions and moral guidance will not be so highly sought must be choking him.

At the end of my father's address, there is a standing ovation for the old fraud. If I do not follow suit I will stand out. As he proceeds down the aisle, with my mother in his wake, I seem to be invisible to him.

Then, just as he passes by, he reaches out his hand. I feel the power of his fingers on my shoulder. An observer might mistakenly interpret this action as brotherly or, more appropriately, paternal love. He leads me to the familiar small storage room at the back of the hall, which houses the chairs and trestle tables.

Deprived of an audience, except for his only child, he drops his guard. He closes the door behind us and faces me with a menacing expression.

"You can't be here."

"Why not?"

"We told everybody that you were dead. It was easier that way."

"But lying is a sin, isn't it? Or have they changed the rules since I last came here? It's one of the Ten Commandments- the Eighth isn't it?"

"Don't quote the Bible at me! Your mother couldn't bear the shame that you brought on our family."

"What shame? I told you I was gay and you threw me out of the house."

"You made your decision to turn away from your faith and upbringing. You chose to live a life of filth."

"But as a father, don't you want me to be happy?"

"How can you be happy, living that sort of life? We offered to pray with you, to heal you."

At this point my mother enters the room. I hear my birth name, spoken for the first time in a quarter of a century. I go by a different name now. It was part of my reinvention. She instinctively walks towards me but my father bars her way.

"Wasn't it enough that you'd killed your twin sister? There's not a day goes by that I don't wish that you had died in her place. She would never have disgraced us. You had to bring shame on us and then come back today and denigrate my whole life's achievements. Well I won't let you. Get out!"

I'm stunned at his anger and at first can't process this wild accusation. There is silence, apart from the sound of my mother sobbing in the corner. One of the church elders tries to enter the room, concerned about my father's raised voice. He is told that everything is all right and that we are almost finished. The door closes again. How can we ever be all right?

"But she only lived for a few hours. She just wasn't strong enough. Surely you both understand? It wasn't my fault."

My mother manages to stand and address me: "I think it's best that you leave."

"But, Mum. Please..."

"Go. This is your father's day. Please don't spoil it for him."

My father looks on, allowing his wife to do his work for him. He puts his arm around my mother's shoulder and leads her out of the room. She turns to me and says softly: "Let yourself out the side door. We don't want anybody to see you here."

My father could not have scripted it better.

I'm outside the hall, sitting on the wall, shocked at what has been said and the intensity of their feelings after all this time. I suppose I expected there to be some primitive parental drive which might have overcome their prejudices. I imagined my mother hugging me and my father telling me it was good to see me. But it wasn't to be that way. I hoped that my mother had said all that for my father's benefit and that she would find some excuse to come outside, run after me and initiate another meeting. I wait for ten minutes but she doesn't come out. It's a warm evening and windows are open. I hear people chatting and laughing. Occasionally I catch my father's voice. I give my mother five more minutes.

She doesn't come.

Highly commended Mae Wakes up Keith Snavely

Mae woke up on a Saturday morning with a frog on her forehead.

Between the birds singing before dawn and the early sunrise on the late spring morning, Mae woke up sooner than she really wanted to. Consciousness gradually took hold as she lay in bed, first noticing the background sounds out the bedroom window, becoming aware of the light through her closed eyelids and feeling the snug fit of a soft cotton nightgown. Then, there was the sensation she noticed on her forehead, a slight pressure weighing down on it from something that ought not to be there.

Mae's natural impulse was to deliver a fierce swat with a hand to knock off whatever it was, but that's not what she did. Instead, Mae lay frozen in terror imagining all sorts of things the object could be. Sweat poured out of Mae's body and her heart raced as she drew in short, shallow breaths.

A flash of memory reminded her how to ease the panic. Mae's yoga teacher had instructed the class to take in long, deep breaths so you could focus and calm your mind. For over two months Mae had been taking a yoga class in a former Quikie Mart located behind the Citgo gas station down the road about two miles at the four way stop. Her friend Arlene from the appliance factory, where they both worked the day shift, had talked Mae into taking yoga with her so she wouldn't be alone. Arlene had developed stiff, arthritic joints from several years of assembly line repetitive motions and her doctor recommended yoga as a way to loosen up.

So, Mae breathed, drawing in long breaths, exhaling the same, her belly rising and falling. She concentrated on the short pause at the end of each inhale and exhale, resting in the peace present in those still, silent moments. It didn't take long before Mae's heart slowed down, the sweat stopped pouring over her body and her mind stopped racing. Focusing all her attention on the slight weight on her forehead Mae was able to make out four tiny feet and a moist body, its belly moving rhythmically with breath.

It wasn't a large frog, most likely one of those small cricket frogs she read about in the local newspaper. Scientists said they discovered that the countryside around where Mae lived had a large population of this rare frog. The "gick-gick-gick" noises it made was a familiar sound to the locals so they weren't much impressed by the so-called discovery. Mae decided it must be a cricket frog. As best she could reckon, without actually being able to see the frog, it was smallish and light weight.

Yes, a cricket frog it must be since they were plentiful in those parts despite being declared rare.

At this point in her reflections Mae's husband, Pope, entered the bedroom.

"Mae," he said in his typical deadpan, matter-of-fact way, "they's a frog on your forehead."

"I know it Pope."

"You want me to knock it off for you?"

"No, that's alright. Just let it be."

"Okay," Pope replied and he went back to the other end of their double-wide trailer to finish cooking his breakfast.

Mae resumed her reflections, particularly wondering how that frog got to be on her forehead, when long simmering desire called forth. In a vision she saw that just like in the fairy tales, that frog was enchanted. It was really a handsome, wholesome prince who had a spell cast over him by an ugly hag of a witch because he refused to take up with her even when she appeared to be a beautiful, buxom damsel. Princes can see through beauty to ugly. Like all spells this one could be broken by the kiss of a gorgeous, faithful, innocent, pure lady.

That frog had come to rescue Mae from her fate. Everything could be changed by one kiss. Pope would be replaced by a handsome, rich nobleman who would forever provide her with her every want and would dote on her with a steady stream of affection. Pope, after all, was no dreamboat. He was a big man, standing at six foot, four inches and weighing 275 pounds. Pope had some promise when he and Mae got married. At that time Pope was a forklift driver at a large distribution center for a national grocery store chain, but he was ambitious to move up in the labor ranks. He succeeded in doing just that, working his way up to foreman. Those were golden times for Mae and Pope. Between their two jobs they could afford a nice ranch home and even got an RV to take vacations in. Everything caved in though when the distribution center closed down and Pope lost his job. The only work he could find was managing a local laundromat, fixing machines, giving out change, and keeping the place clean. A magical, handsome prince would save Mae from the weight of such drudgery, bring excitement and

luxury to her life. The thoughts of fame, fortune and standing thrilled her. Mae reveled in this dream for several minutes until she found her hand moving toward the frog to grasp it and give it a passionate kiss. Just as she was about to reach the frog Mae stopped the motion of her hand and laid it back down. "What silliness!" Mae thought to herself. There were no enchanted princes in the world ready to save her and offer a magical life. There was only hardship and struggle and Pope. Anyway, even if there was an enchanted prince inside that frog Mae knew there was no way she was sufficiently innocent and pure to break the spell and glamorous would have to be redefined to fit her. Maybe there was a frog on her forehead but that was all it was, just a frog. No magical prince inside to refresh her weary self. Mae bathed in sullenness, enjoying its addictive, bittersweet perfume. As she did so a thought crossed her mind. Mae reached over to the end table next to her side of the bed and felt around until she found the small hand mirror she had used the night before to pluck her eyebrows. Holding it firmly in her grip she swung the mirror out in front of her face so that she could get a good look at the frog. Expecting the ordinary, what Mae saw was a frog bathed in brilliant light radiating the colors of the rainbow. It sparkled and glimmered with red and indigo and green and yellow and orange. Casting her sight beyond the mirror Mae saw that it wasn't just the frog but the whole room that glowed with color and light. She knew immediately that the rising sun had filled her bedroom with rainbow colors as its golden rays refracted through a crystal hanging in the window. Mae beheld a glorious luminescent vision of life. It no longer looked dreary and ordinary and gray. Life, she saw, was light and vibrant color.

In this, her second vision, Pope was in fact the magical prince. Others may not be able to see him that way, but Mae could. Pope had been a faithful, steady companion in life showering love on Mae as best he knew how. The affection he showed was not to be discounted. There was the time when the doctor told Mae and Pope that she would not be able to have children. Mae was devastated. She felt like less than a woman and wouldn't blame Pope for leaving her since she couldn't fulfill a normal wifely role. But Pope didn't leave and he worked hard to help Mae get through her grief. He took off work for a whole week to take care of Mae who went to bed in a deep depression. Pope brought her flowers he bought at a local grocery store, gave her a get well card with lace and flowery words, talked encouragingly to her about what a good life the two of them could have together, and took care of all the household chores.

Mae also saw in her vision that the double-wide was a castle. They were lucky to have it. At the time Mae and Pope had to sell their ranch house because of their financial troubles, an elderly friend decided to move out of town and live with his children. He sold his double-wide to Mae and Pope at a price they could afford so they were never without a place to call their own. The timing was just right. Maybe it was a step down in life but at least they had shelter and a place to store their possessions and make into something that felt comfortably like home. Mae saw that the double-wide had all they needed to live a pleasant, fulfilling life.

Mae was now able to see the whole of her life as majestic. You just had to look beyond the surface and see how events had enfolded in ways that could not be planned or predicted. Life was infused with healing light, shining in and through everything. Where just a few minutes earlier Mae savored despondency she now reveled in an ecstatic vision of life. Never before had she had such an expansive experience. This was new and life changing and life giving.

Mae felt herself glowing inside and out and would have stayed in that state for some time but the spell was broken by the sudden motion of the frog leaping off of her forehead and onto the floor. The movement shocked her as much as initially waking up with the frog on her forehead. Something remained, though. Something still rested on her forehead. Mae reached up with her right hand and picked up between her thumb and forefinger a small, black, moist ball of frog leavings. A third vision now came to Mae. Studying the little black ball in her fingers Mae spontaneously laughed loud and hard. Volumes of laughter welled up from deep inside her, laughter that Mae never knew she was capable of. She laughed with her whole being as she thought about Pope as a prince. That was an immense stretch. Yes, Pope was gentle and kind and affectionate in his own way, but he was also big and slow witted and somewhat dull. Pope was Pope.

She laughed harder when she thought about the double-wide being a strong, spacious, luxurious castle. It was drafty and small and they were forever having to make repairs. Strong winds rocked the trailer back and forth and both she and Pope knew that a tornado would blow them into the next county. Mae laughed at other circumstances in her life. Not being able to experience motherhood hurt deeply.

Losing their home added deep pain to the stress of Pope losing his job even if they were lucky to get a trailer home. Mae's job was dreadful. Working an assembly line she found physically easy but the monotony ate away at her mind.

As all of these thoughts streamed through her head, Mae continued to laugh deliciously, joyfully. Pope was not a handsome prince come to save her, the double-wide was not an enchanted castle and life was often hard. That was the simple truth of life. But, knowing that truth in this moment without fear or judgment was enormously liberating for Mae. It made desire bearable and gave the light presence. Hearing the hooting and hollering, Pope made his way back to the bedroom. In his deliberate manner he asked, "Mae, are you alright?"
"Yes, Pope, I'm alright. I'm really alright."